

MAHESH DATTANI'S "SEVEN STEPS AROUND FIRE"

THE TABOO UNLEASHED

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ABSTRACT

Society, an amalgam of different species, has been constituted to provide a comfortable life to everyone whoever is blessed with life. Rights are given and duties are assigned to make it so. But how far this is true? Are not there communities which are panting under deprivations and exploitations, for whom there is no sky of freedom, no land of rights, and that is because they cannot be bound in the definition of a male or a female. The paper aims to throw light on the grievances of the lowest community of the society i.e. eunuchs who are entrapped in the heinous life of sneers and sorrows just because they have not been blessed with the title of either man or woman. Mahesh Dattani, the famous playwright has tried to touch this hush-hush subject and has come up with a strange solution that they should be accepted with open heart and broad mind.

KEY WORDS: Society, Hijra, Community, Humiliation, Mockery

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INTRODUCTION

Full Text

Literature, when goes beyond the boundaries of entertainment and expression to become the mouthpiece of the underdogs and underprivileged, serves the real purpose of its existence. The potency and the cogency of it are so that the realm of proscribed issues not only nose out mention but also track down attention. Mahesh Dattani, the warlock of Indian English Drama has explored this fact in the true sense. Many times the issues that his plays explore serve as an eye opener for society and many social taboos are blown the lid off. He has been lured by the most rampant issues that have eluded attention of society and his critical gaze is flung even on the most freezed out people of society. The hush hush topics that have been thrown in the oblivion of neglect in Indian society are gone over by him with fine tooth comb. For the same reason one whole play is penned by him to screen the abysmal predicament of the invisibly present community of eunuchs in society. The present paper on this issue tries to raise the question, "Do the genitals rule over the world?" "Does everyone get various rights only because he or she may be categorized as male or female?" To take birth as human being is no condition to be treated as human being unless one can prove one's masculinity or femininity. The treatment of the society that is received by the most spurned clique, the Eunuchs, is the ample proof of that. Mahesh Dattani does not dither a bit to bring before the people the real image of this community.

The Eunuch is the most ignored the most ironical creed of the world that has been trapped in the whirlpool of the hideous life of humiliation, mockery, jibe, scoff, consternation and trepidation. They are in this world yet are invisible, a part of the society yet not part of it. They dispense the largesse of motherhood or connubial bliss yet pining for the same for them. "Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in

matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons'." (pp. 10-11 Collected Plays I.) The importunate implorations and pleas of human activists who speak volumes about human rights to be given to all humans of society turn a blind eye towards this strange group.

The term Eunuch –hijra that is commonly used to denote a sexless person is defined in dictionary as a castrated man. The word finds its mention as a Greek word *eunoukhos* that means "a castrated male employed to serve the women in the women's quarters of a household and to act as chamberlain", and the Greek word is derived from *eunē*, "bed" and *ekhein*, "to hold, to keep." In ancient times they occupied much different place in society as being the privy of the ruling families; they had esoteric information of affairs and were no longer ineffectual as they are considered now.

"Seven Steps Around Fire", a radio play commissioned by BBC has not only explored the social status of this community of third sex but also delved deep in their subsistence on the hem of society. Dattani is successful in bringing before the people the ostracized life of the community besides unveiling the message how insignificant the life of a eunuch is. Even if he is murdered, nobody bothers. *"Dattani has done a good job by introducing a new theme to Indian English drama. Conservatives and social activists should not turn a blind eye to reality... We have to accept the reality of life, however, painful that might be."* (p.17 Das, Bijay Kumar) The play mirrors the emotional crisis of eunuch community and is based on the murder of a Eunuch Kamala. Anarkali, the other eunuch is accused of Kamala's murder and was arrested. Somehow this case no. 7 attracts the attention of Uma who is the wife of Ramesh, the superintendent of Police and daughter of a vice chancellor. She chooses the case as the subject matter for study. Her meeting with Anarkali transports her in the deep empathy with the community as she actually feels the biased behavior of people. As Uma tries to unfold the mystery of Kamala's murder, her meeting with others of this community unravels the deep rooted shackles that have crippled them. Deprivation of basic human rights has reached to its zenith when they are denied an address of he or she and are addressed as an inanimate it. The basic feeling of life is ended with it. In the play *Munswamy*, the police constable addresses Anarkali with an overstressed "it". While Uma addresses Anarkali 'she', *Munswamy* chuckles and satirically repeats the word 'she' as though she has committed a blunder and tries to rectify it by emphasizing 'it'.

Munswamy. (Chuckling). *She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't.*

(P. 03 *Seven Steps Around Fire.*)

Aridity of relation in their life, duress to be clenched in the periphery of their own community, suffocation of insults compels them sometimes to commit crimes or to try to come out of those shackles violently or illegally. They pine for relations. Human beings who can love even the animals, having them as pet cast insulting glances over these eunuchs. The eunuchs' relations are built with love and are strengthened with words. A little bit of sympathy shown towards them moves them. As Anarkali asserts

"Anarkali. We make our relations with our eyes. With our love. I look at him, he looks at me and he, is my brother. (Munswamy looks away). I look at you and you look at me and we are mother and daughter." (07 *Seven Steps Around the Fire*)

Anarkali tries her best to save her sister Kamla from the cruel hands of society as Kamla was very beautiful. Anarkali even smashed her face with the knife so that she may not remain pretty. The relations which are built on the words are faced up in every situation. Anarkali knew that it would be very difficult for Kamla to survive in this world with that beauty so to save her from the disgrace she did that without any repentance.

Even Champa the head hijra is sad beyond consolation at the bereavement of Kamla as she considered her as her daughter. On the allegation of Uma that she had killed Kamla her strong emotions are burst out.

"CHAMPA. That is not true!

We had fights. But Anarkali and me- we are not killers...

CHAMPA. She was my only daughter!"

(20 Seven Step Around the Fire)

Based on words, their relations are sometimes stronger even than the blood relations and their community survives only because of these bonds. Champa tells Uma that –*"you don't know how much we all loved her! You will not understand. I loved her more than you can love your daughter! You don't know."* (20Seven Step Around the Fire)

Even in love and care they are normal human being while the whole world neglects them humans. While severely beaten in the police lockup, Anarkali winces in pain Champa tries her best to console her she even puts her head in her lap and sway her like a baby. She even caresses her like mother. When the memories of her mother's songs flash on the heart of Anarkali Champa says-

"CHAMPA. shut up. I am your mother. Understand?

ANARKALI. Then sing.

CHAMPA. Say that, you bitch!...now close your eyes .

And champa sings a lullaby for Anarkali. The privation of relations makes them more conscious to maintain relation and they form irrefutable relations.

They pine for a respectable public identity. Society does not recognize them eligible for social protection and they become the victim of abuse, beating and other kinds of tortures. They are denied safety and are even raped. Even the police custody does not provide protection. When they are tagged as third sex, they are not provided for separate cells. They are kept with men and are victimized of all types of abuse. The worst aspect is that the whole humanity turns a deaf ear to their grievances and shut eyes to their sufferings. The indifference of the people becomes more acute as these occult forces do not let them to model their own destiny or fate to their own wish as they are dependent on the benevolence of others.

Every where they are constrained to be in their limits foisted by the society. Dattani has casted his gaze on this aspect also when he shows Anarkali in the jail. From prisoners to the superintendent of Police are inclined to deride her. When Uma intends to meet Anarkali, she is reluctant to meet. Not only the prisoners but also the police show ruthless attitude as when Anarkali refuses to meet Uma, Munswamy becomes angry and orders her fellow prisoners to beat her. All the prisoners wallow in beating her relentlessly.

"MUNSWAMY(hitting the bars) Back! Back it! Kick the hijra!

The other inmates begin to beat Anarkali up.

ANARKALI. (hitting back at first) Ai! Don't touch me !

The inmates scream with pleasure as they beat up Anarkali.

Aaagh! Aaagh!"(P. 05Seven Step Around the Fire)

The indifference of the superintendent of Police towards the welfare of a prisoner only because of the reason that she is a hijra is reflected when he says to his wife Uma that she should not worry about the grievance of those hijras as all these are liars. Although Uma was raising the most serious question “why did they put her (Anarkali) in a male prison?” but Suresh cared a fig and answers in the most casual way “*Don’t believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars.*” (P. 05 *Seven Step Around the Fire*) SURESH. (off) *what is that you said? Sister? (Approaching) There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerated men. They fought like dogs everyday, that Anarkali and...* (P. 06 *Seven Step Around the Fire*)

For police they don’t have any individual existence. They are community to be tortured and to be despised. Anarkali is arrested only because there was no one else to be arrested for the murder. Even his sufferings have no effect and Suresh again and again tells Uma that she should not trust whatever Anarkali says.

SURESH. *May be. Who knows. If she runs away to another town, who can trace these people? Anyway, we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. These hijras...they cut off their balls...they kill.*

The fear is so much of police that only the name or uniform of police is sufficient to give them a shiver of fear. When Uma goes to meet the head hijra, she says to Munswamy-

UMA. *Oh all right. But stay about a hundred yards away from me. I don’t want you scaring all the hijras away.* (P. 15 *Seven Step Around the Fire*)

The irony is that the protector is predator and the victim can’t escape.

Villainous role of media is no less iniquitous as it makes the life of eunuchs more miserable many of the times. The most emotional matters are aired malevolently in the name of bringing into light. With the mantra of sensationalism the media picks the most sensitive topics as that of hijras and marginalized and makes it the most lucrative report to be broadcasted. The motive of bringing justice for everyone remains far behind and the hearts are rent asunder as the questions are unbearable, shame intolerable, insult immeasurable, scurrility implausible and ignominy indelible. Even the neglected existence is highlighted in most abominable way. Dattani is well aware of the fact and that is why he put forward the same in only one line of Anarkali, while she is in jail.

MUNSWAMY. *Ai! Anarkali! Come here.*

ANARKALI. (from far). *No! I don’t want to meet any journalist.*

She is so much fed up of all the questions that she is reluctant to meet anyone now. Questions !yes the questions are sometimes the throngs that pierce and give wounds and Anarkali knows very well that there will be no advantage in meeting the journalist as no truth is going to be unearthed. There will be tumultuous throng of reporters, surprised look of people, Showers of enquiries, flashes of cameras, capture of poses and scandals of sensation, demands for rights and a sudden debacle and catastrophe at the end leaving tears in eyes, lesion in heart and rage in mind. The visits of journalists in search of stories are so frequent in those blind alley of eunuch community that Even Champa the head hijra thinks Uma as journalist as she turns up to meet her.. She tells Uma-

CHAMPA. *Hah!...so, you are not a journalist.* (P. 15 *Seven Step Around the Fire*)

Not only the police or journalists take advantage of the situation in which the community lives but also the

society, the elite class also makes the condition worse. Anarkali is arrested only because there was no one else to be arrested. The minister having all the power to do justice ignores the situation as his own son is involved in the case. Kamla is murdered with no fault of hers, Anarkali is imprisoned with no fault, and Champa, head hijra has to answer all the censures, all the questions with no fault. All because the son of minister falls in love and marries with a eunuch. Kamla being very beautiful could not save herself from the eyes of Subbu, the son of minister who genuinely loves her, marries her but the society does not let them to do what they like and the dead body of Kamla is found. Mr. Sharma, father of Subbu gets her killed by burning alive. The worst aspect of society that binds everyone in the circumference of rules and regulations without caring for the emotions of the person comes before the society. Life of a person is not as valuable as the sham that nobody can go beyond the ambit of society. It is better for Mr. Sharma that Subbu loses his mental balance at the end and commits suicide than to let him do whatever he feels right. The most powerful people of society use their power in the most inhuman way. *"Uma (voice-over). They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people..." (p.42 Collected Plays I)*

The society, the vilifier of the eunuchs, is so selfish that it invites and welcomes them on marriages and births for supernatural blessings but neglect them on other occasions. Human beings ask for prosperity, long line of posterity as blessings from those whom they do not consider as human beings. Having count, the eunuchs are not counted in the society.

It is also considered as misfortune if the hijras are returned without giving blessing. As Uma asserts-

UMA. No. It is bad luck to turn away a hijra on a wedding or a birthday. (P. 29 Seven Step Around the Fire)

The community, hoarding neglect, sneer, abuse, barbs, thrashing, beating and worse prorates spiritual bliss, blessings, and benedictions in the society. Dattani has not winked his eye from this aspect also. Anarkali is tortured so much for the crime that she has not committed, she has been beaten by her fellow prisoners, she was kept with men in jail, and she was pressurized to confess the crime to which she has no concerned. The treatment was worse than animals, yet after coming out of the prison she bears no ill will against society, she even blesses Uma, the wife of superintendent who is also one of the reasons for her sufferings.

ANARKALI. A special mantra is in the locket. Champa gave it to me for you.

Uma looks at it.

Wear it.

Anarkali puts the locket around Uma's neck.

You will be blessed with children.

Uma is moved by this. She embraces Anarkali.

Sister

They look at each other

May you and your family be happy! (P.32 Seven Step Around the Fire)

The community the harbinger of bliss in the form of blessings pines for a little love from the society. The ridicule and mockery at the hands of society hurt them to the core yet life has to move on. The insults are so heart rending that the community fight shy of the people and keeps their whereabouts as secret. In India the community has a recorded history of more than 4000 years but the discrimination based on the class and gender makes them one of the most fettered and disempowered groups in the society. They are the victims of all types of harassments, rapes, and violence. Violence that is not confined to their families only but also is extended to police custody.

CONCLUSIONS

The internal conflicts of the community, the psychological afflictions and frustrations of life are more obtrusive. To yoke a blind life, deprived of rights to live, is not only a burden but also a punishment. The community is closely knit and keeps its habitat secret even from the closest one whose glance of hatred not only pierces the heart but also kills the desire to live. The internal conflicts are more unbearable. Meena Balaji and other Eunuchs of India with the help of Ruth Lor Malloy, a Chinese Canadian have published a book "Hijras: Who we Are." of thirty two pages which gives voice to internal anguish of everyone of them. One of them said "we are sick of our traditional means of livelihood – singing dancing for bakhshesh (tip) or being reduced to sheer beggary in trains and on streets. I am not pleading for sympathy. I want a change in social attitudes. I want it as a matter of right, rights which other members of society normally have access to." Yes rights that are what the requirement of this neglected society. Right to live, right to education, right to earn livelihood and deliverance from the flagrant occupation of prostitution and slavery should be given to them. Marriage of Kamla and Subbu in the novel presents the most modern outlook on the part of Subbu who is ready to face even the worst circumstances and marries Kamla as marriage is the unification of two hearts only. For him it does not matter that Kamla is neither male nor female. But this modern outlook is not easily digested by the society and the thoughts are nipped in the bud by society. Dattani wants to show that somewhere somehow there is need of change, of acceptance, of respect for this community. The strangeness of appearance, gestures, thoughts and voice are not to invite ignominy but appeal to be treated as normal human being.

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